

Shaw Societies: Once and Now

By Stanley Weintraub

[Updated in 2020 by R. F. Dietrich after Stan's death in 2019. Updating notes are in brackets. Everything not in brackets was written by Stan Weintraub]

The International Shaw Society, the active and collective memory of Shavians past, present and future, dates effectively from January 2004. Although two Shaw societies date from Shaw's lifetime, only one survives. The London-based Shaw Society resulted from Fritz Erwin Loewenstein's wearing down Shaw's opposition to its establishment. Shaw wrote to him wearily on November 14, 1941, about past societies in which he had been involved as a young man:

The Browning Society was a terror to Browning.

Shelley was dead.

Shakespear was dead.

I shall soon be dead.

We all provided a rallying point for the co-operation and education of kindred spirits and a forum for their irreconcilable controversies.

So go ahead; but don't bother me about it. I am old, deaf, and dotty. In short, a has been.

[It should be noted that Shaw sometimes showed more interest in The Shaw Society as time went on, until his death in 1950.]

Loewenstein, a refugee from Hitler's Germany with an art history doctorate from Wurzburg on Japanese prints and a stay as an enemy alien on the Isle of Man, was forty and a motor-mechanic trainee. His hobby since 1936 had been Shavian bibliography. Once Shaw relented, Loewenstein called a meeting to inaugurate a society, and backdated its founding to Shaw's 85th birthday on July 26, 1941.

Shaw would give Loewenstein some "gravedigging" bibliographical work to do, causing his long-time secretary, Blanche Patch, to complain that G.B.S. "inflicts the Jew on me." Energetic without being efficient, Loewenstein gave the administrative work of the new society to Eric Batson, and began publishing small snippets of Shaviana from the G.B.S. archives, such as "Mr. Shaw Regrets," a scissors-and-paste piece in the August 1946 American Mercury quoting from Shaw's color-coded postcards. Soon Batson called himself General Secretary and began editing a society bulletin [now "journal,"] which he renamed The Shavian. It still goes on, as do the society's monthly meetings and the annual birthday performances at Ayot St. Lawrence [which was canceled in 2019 by the National Trust, but there are hopes for revival]. In time Barbara Smoker took over as General Secretary and editor, then Tom Evans as editor from 1964. Evans has now been succeeded

by Ivan Wise. [And now by Anne Wright]. Barry Morse is its current president [Now Sir Michael Holroyd]. And Evelyn and Anthony Ellis publish its Newsletter. [The Newsletter has not been published for some years].

In America, recognizing the mortality tables, William D. Chase, a Flint, Michigan newspaper editor, did not wait for Shaw's approval of the founding of the Shaw Society of America in June 1950, but sent him the announcement. The sage of Ayot was only weeks away from his 94th and last birthday. Still haunting the premises despite Miss Patch, Loewenstein replied, tipping Chase off that a reply from Shaw was coming. It came on July 1, 1950. In it Shaw professed awe at the "illustrious names on the foundation committee." He preferred an "Einstein Society" or other alternatives "named after other famous persons much cleverer than I ever was," but accepted the fact. "I can only hope," he closed, "that in other hands Shavianism will be carried so far that future generations will say 'We agree with your doctrine; but who the devil was Bernard Shaw?'"

The society's first Bulletin was published in February 1951 with Chase as editor. With number three it became The Shaw Bulletin, and as of number 5 in May 1954 it was edited by Dan H. Laurence. The society's meetings were arranged largely by theatrical lawyer David Marshall Holtzmann, the treasurer, and lawyer-bibliophile Maxwell Steinhardt, who arranged for the use of the Grolier Club in New York. When illness prevented Laurence from continuing, Stanley Weintraub became editor, publishing a centenary issue (number ten) in November 1956. The Bulletin metamorphosed into The Shaw Review once it began regular publishing via the Penn State Press, and in 1981 became SHAW. The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies, edited by Weintraub into 1989 and then by Fred D. Crawford until his death. Volumes 21 in 2001 and thereafter into 2004 were edited by Gale K. Larson with MaryAnn Crawford. With the death of Larson, the co-editors became MaryAnn Crawford and Michel Pharand. [The current General Editor of the journal is Christopher Wixson]. However, the [Shaw] Society [of America] began to fail much earlier with the deaths of its chief New York sponsors, and faded from the scene in the 1970s.

While the Shaw Society of America remained active, a parallel local organization began operation, the Bernard Shaw Society, which originated in 1952 as the New York regional group of the London Shavians. Its organizer was Vera Scriabine, an immigrant who had long before fled the Bolshevik revolution and who held the first meetings in her Washington Square apartment. Its organ, The Independent Shavian, begun in 1962, still continues, and its meetings since 1984 [?] have been held in the town house of the American Irish Historical Society. Its current president is Rhoda Nathan, a professor emerita at Hofstra University, Vice Presidents are Daniel Leary and Sally Peters, and its secretary is Douglas Laurie. [Many corrections and updates of this account of the BSSNY are needed and those included here were provided to me by once VP Sally Peters. Going further back than Stan does, it seems the original driving force was Richard Nickson, who was also the original editor of The Independent Shavian, and meetings were held in his loft apartment. Rhoda Nathan took over in the 1980s, moving the meetings to the American Irish Historical Society, although Richard still edited The Independent Shavian. With the death of Douglas Laurie in

2011, The Bernard Shaw Society NY collapsed soon after, and The Independent Shavian with it.

It has been replaced in New York not by a new “society” but by “Project Shaw,” instituted by David Staller, who has provided monthly “concert readings” of Shaw’s plays, as well as full productions, by professional actors for many years at various New York venues, currently Symphony Space at 2537 Broadway @ 95th Street. Noteworthy is that in the pandemic of 2020, the concert readings have migrated to the Internet with Zoom productions. See <https://gingoldgroup.org/project-shaw/>].

For a time, primarily in the 1960s, regional Shaw societies flourished in Chicago and Los Angeles, largely dependent upon energetic sponsors, Lois Solomon Weisberg in Illinois and Eddy Feldman in California. For many years the California group held an annual vegetarian Shaw birthday dinner with a guest G.B.S. scholar as speaker. “Bernard Shaw Day” in Chicago also featured a vegetarian luncheon, and a symposium. [Not a “society” per se but flourishing in Chicago for many years as if it was a Shaw Society was the ShawChicago Theatre Company, which, under the direction of Robert Scogin, presented concert readings, excellent in demonstrating that Shaw’s plays don’t really need a theater, for his music and the action cues for actors are in the words as read, as good actors reveal. But Shaw/Chicago also did full productions.]

[Leonard Conolly apprises me that there once was a Shaw Society in Toronto, Canada, founded sometime around 1944 by Lee Pritzker, which was active until the early 1950s. A small file on its activities is housed in the Conolly Theatre Archives at the University of Guelph. But by far the most significant Shaw enterprise going since 1962 is The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, which is not a “society” but one of the best repertory companies in the English theater anywhere. Customarily it presents 10-12 plays every year, with usually two by Shaw, and the history of its first 50 years can be found in L. W. Conolly’s *The Shaw Festival: The First Fifty Years*].

Other Shaw societies have arisen abroad. A Shaw Society of Japan holds regular meetings, usually in Tokyo. [Hisashi Morikawa adds that it was founded in 1971 by Matahiko Ichikawa, professor emeritus at Waseda University, the BSSJ holds regular meetings in Tokyo, Nagoya and some other cities].

A Shaw Society of India founded in 1984 by Vinod Sharma, formerly of the University of Delhi, holds conferences in collaboration with sponsoring Indian universities in various places across the nation. Given the costs of international travel, it is likely that further such societies will materialize.

Stanley Weintraub was an American historian and biographer and an expert on George Bernard Shaw. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Weintraub.

[NOTE: Although the International Shaw Society was briefly mentioned at the beginning of Stan Weintraub's "history" of Shaw Societies, it should be noted that this essay exists on the internet because of the ISS, founded in 2004 and still going strong in 2020. For information about the ISS, please go to the society's homepage at <http://shawsociety.org/>. The updates of Stan's history have been provided by Hisashi Morikawa, Leonard Conolly, Sally Peters, and Richard Dietrich].